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The Salesian Educational Mission in Brazil: Past Achievements and Contemporary Challenges

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Abstract

Presented here is the historical development of the education model provided by the *Salesianos de Dom Bosco* (SDB-Dom Bosco's Salesians), the so-called *socio-communitarian education*. This educational system was developed by priest John Bosco in Piemonte (Italy) reaching Brazil in the second half of the nineteenth century. Bosco has based it on the concept of *Oratory*, an educational and socio-developmental project for the youth at social risk. Such educational strategy reveals itself as a community one, leading to the Salesians' modern actions in Brazil. As a contemporary challenge, the consolidation of relevant definitions for the socio-communitarian aspects of educational action is sought.

Keywords: Salesians; Brazil; Achievements; Contemporary challenges.

Introduction

This paper discusses Saint John Bosco's work and the consequential concept of socio-communitarian education - the conceptual basis of the Salesian work which is currently being conducted in Brazil. Initially we consider the existence of communities and community life. From the community life point of view, there is a practical counterpart of an education which meets its inherent relationships, irrespective of the practiced modality - scholar or extra-scholar, formal or informal and even non-formal methods of education.

We consider the Salesian Congregation mission in Brazil in hindsight and also from the prospective possibilities. Remarkable features of the Salesian work on Brazilian soil are often associated with the schools, boarding schools, social projects and the conceptual basis that it governs: the Preventive System of John Bosco (or Dom Bosco, as he is affectionately called throughout the world). Particularly, we would like to define and develop the educational/sociological concept that supports his educational practice, that is, the socio-communitarian education. This is seminal in the understanding of the educational role that members of the Salesian community played in the various sectors of activity, which ended up generating a new research division in education. We intend to define the socio-communitarian education as practiced by the Salesians since they arrived in Brazil, and dedicate ourselves to the construction of a definition and a theoretical model that supports its practices nowadays and perhaps in the future as well. The theoretical and methodological foundation that drives us is the concept of community and community life - called "family life", practiced and lived by the Salesians in their educational institutions since the beginning of their history with John Bosco (ISAÚ, 2007).

1. The Man

The Italian catholic priest John Bosco (1815-1888) took on as his life mission the education of the youth at social risk in the nineteenth-century's Europe, a period of great political and social tribulation of Italy's industrialization and the unification movements of the Italian peninsula. He has been regarded by modern writers as the founder of his own pedagogy, which he called Preventive System (BRAIDO, 2004), though the priest himself has never claimed that the former system was a formal pedagogy.



The concept of praxis is essential to the proposed system, and from this point of view we can correlate Bosco's work with the educational processes of change in the living conditions of young people under his responsibility. Praxis (from Greek *πράξις*), in its broadest sense, is the human activity in society and nature. In pedagogy, praxis is the process by which a theory, lesson or skill is performed or practiced by converting it into lived experience. Whilst in teaching, the content is only absorbed at a cognitive level during a lesson; ideas are put to the test and tried in the real world, followed by a reflective contemplation. In this way, abstract concepts bind with vivid reality. Praxis is used by educators to describe a scenario of the cyclical process of learning by experience.

According to Paulo Freire, praxis "is the reflection and action of men over the world to transform it" (1987, p. 38). Transforming the world through reflection and action is a necessary educational praxis. The liberating educational act constitutes into an act of affection and hope, within a transformative action. For Freire, men must be understood in his relations with the world and the work of transformation of that world. Men must be, therefore, a praxis agent for action and reflection.

By taking into account all the definitions presented here, we can certainly conclude that John Bosco uses the concept of praxis in his pedagogy, when he worries about the autonomy that young people should show towards life in the difficult historical moment in which they lived. It is not just enough offering formal education, it is necessary to prepare students for the questions and conflicts of life. His proposal for the emancipation of people reaches the level of preparing them for crafts, which may seem paradoxical, but in the context of European industrialism, it is acceptable. His interpretation of what is pedagogy, as not merely the way in which content or lessons are transmitted to learners, but something to be implemented and practiced in life, turning into a lived experience with reflection value of the process as a whole, is still pursued in our time by theorists and thinkers of education. Unfortunately, this vision is precarious in educational and school environments where the training of teachers seems to barely consider these issues, at least in the actual execution of what is learned in teacher training.

To Bosco, educational systems may be of preventive or repressive types. In the former, the educator must be a guide along with the student, kindly providing advice and corrections. Therefore, the stand of his Preventive System, as we shall see, has as its component loving kindness – affection (SCARAMUSSA, 1984).

2. The Work

Don Bosco established an inseparable binomial with the youth of his community, which characterizes his pedagogy, anchored on the reason-religion-affection tripod. In conjunction with the reflections on the complexity, it can be stated that for Dom Bosco, an education with only one one-dimensional view is impossible. He does not simplify education because he sees the youth in its various dimensions. Briefly, we can say that they are a head (reason), a heart (loving kindness - affection) and a knee (religion) that are to be educated. This model, called the Preventive System, was the foundation of an educational action which has come to our days by the continuity of Bosco's work, and that, according to the findings of this paper can certainly be applied to contemporary educational processes. The affection and reason may be associated in the pedagogical actions, displaying an interesting convergence to be explored by the educators of our time.

His pedagogical and educational model takes into account the education of the youth at risk in the nineteenth-century's Europe, a period of great political and social turmoil of the industrialization process in Italy, and unification movements of the Italian peninsula (SOFFNER e SANDRINI, 2012). Considered by some modern authors as a unique pedagogy, Bosco called his educational model the Preventive System (BRAIDO, 1963, 2004), although he never stated that given system was a formal pedagogy. Here, once again, the main motivation of this work was to confirm the probable pedagogical condition of his educational initiative, but with a solid scientific basis provided by science (or sciences) education.

To Bosco, educational systems may be of preventive or repressive types. In the former, the educator must be a guide along with the student, kindly providing advice and corrections. Therefore, the stand of his Preventive System, as we shall see, has as its component loving kindness – affection (SCARAMUSSA, 1984). The repressive system makes sure that everyone knows the rules, and then watches and punishes any transgressors. It serves especially for soldiers and, in general, for adult and sensible people who, by themselves, should be able to know and remember what is in accordance with the laws and other regulations.

If herein we speak of education, it may seem natural that we define what education is, exactly, by itself (if such endeavor is even possible). From the Latin *e-dúcere* (extract, bring out) or *educare* (to care, take care of), both words may have a biased interpretation based on the idea of someone conducting someone. In addition, the Greek origin of the term pedagogy (*paidós + agogé*) denotes the same meaning: one that conducts the child (the pedagogue was a slave who took the Greek student to school or educational activity and can therefore be his preceptor). That is, the etymological origin of the term education already has the implicit notion of someone who leads someone, what makes us think about the real purpose of it. That is the political, sociological, ideological, pedagogical, psychological and historical purposes as well as those proposed and implemented by John Bosco.

The concept of Greek education in ancient times is the integral formation of men or *Paideia*. What is so well expressed by the German word *bildung*, and expressed classically by Jaeger (1995). The young Greek should be educated and cultured, and at the same time have physical health. According to Teixeira (1999), Plato defends education has, as its



function, the humanization of men, through the will and reason - the citizen of the polis. Plato proposes the formation of the philosopher, the citizen who has the highest level of reason and preparation for the questioning of reality, as well as competence for the citizen activities. Pascal, on the other hand, considers the youth from a corrupt nature, which education must correct the necessary way, while Rousseau believes the youth is good in their human origin, and that nature can provide proper education to their improvement. According to John Bosco's educational proposal, the young man is passively subjected to an unjust society, which deviates him from kindness and Christian salvation of souls, and therefore, his rectification becomes role of religious, civil, moral, artistic, professional and scientific education. Following are considered as factors to be discussed for this: a) family; b) school; c) society; d) educator; e) student; f) educational environment.

The educational environment is essential to achieve these educational goals, plus the reason and understanding of what happens in the world and how common sense can serve as a guide to its interpretation, as well as dialogue and respect – all generating more than a system, but a style – where youth's innate intelligence is sheltered, and a heart that beats in his chest is considered. Even in the most rigid point of view of discipline associated with Bosco's system, we found in a Salesian text dating back to 1946 (with no authorship) the claim that it is part of the preventive system in its characteristics of prevention and counselling to students, headmasters and assistants, before any kind of punishment. The term punishment, modernly speaking, may frighten, but it is notorious the concern with it in preventive criteria and little traumatic from the subject, which unfortunately is part of Bosco's life context. As stated by Soffner and Sandrini (2012), historical research can never separate the object of study from its historical moment. For the Preventive System, the best way to deal with indiscipline is considering the youth as someone human and susceptible to behavior sometimes detrimental to community and social environment.

Braido (1959) had already put questions about the object of education. In terms of general pedagogy, we consider the nature, purpose, factors and method; in practical pedagogy, methodological and didactic dimensions of educational activity – that is, how to educate? In terms of philosophical foundations – why educate? He quotes classic phrases such as "cognitorum per ultimas causas, per essentias", and even the major problems of educational philosophy – "quomodo fit educatio?", "quid terminus a quo, ad quem?"

For Rodríguez (2000), the Preventive System is neither a question of method nor pedagogical formula to hone or replace for the sake of efficiency. It is a life problem of holiness and therefore of John Bosco's charism perpetuation. The concept of praxis, is therefore, very expansive as it relates Bosco's work with the educational processes of change in the lives of young people under his responsibility. To Vásquez (1977), praxis is man's material activity that transforms the natural and social world in order to make it a human world. If the practical is reduced to utilitarian, it eliminates the human aspect, subjective, in the light of the object. In addition, for the Greeks, praxis was action itself - that is - practical, utilitarian, carrying out some activity, but without considering anything beyond itself, or any purpose unrelated to the agent or its activity. What linked an external object to the subject and its actions was poiesis (production or manufacturing). Thus, an artisan was poiesis (poetic), and not praxis (practice). In pedagogy, praxis is the process by which a theory, lesson or skill is performed or practiced by converting it into lived experience. While in teaching the content is only absorbed at cognitive level during a lesson, ideas are put to the test and tried out in the real world, followed by a reflective contemplation. This way, abstract concepts bind to lived reality.

Considering the presented definitions, we conclude that the educational system of Dom Bosco employs the concept of praxis in concern with the autonomy that young people should show about life, not simply the provision of formal education, when preparing the students for questions and conflicts of life. His proposal for the emancipation of the people reaches the level to prepare them for crafts, which may seem paradoxical, but in the context of his time (the European industrialism) it is acceptable. He interprets pedagogy not only the way in which content or lessons are transmitted to learners, but something to be implemented and practiced in life, turning into lived experience with reflection value of the process as a whole.

3. Salesians in Brazil: Socio-Communitarian Education

To Silva (1938), the "social education of youth as an integral part of their learning and needed shot of the educational mission that will only be completed as they have been placed, well equipped, in charge of life, at the gates of society (p. 186)". This statement marks the so-called socio-communitarian education by the Salesians.

What we must anticipate, in the case of Socio-Communitarian Education, is that it differs from, but does not preclude, other areas of education. However, before we elaborate on it, we need to build a sense for the divisions in education and, in this built sense, situate Socio-Communitarian Education. In our case, the proposal of research in socio-communitarian Education emerged from the study of the historical identity of an educational practice, the Salesian education. In its historical origins, it was founded on the articulation of a civil community - religious and ordinary citizens - around an educational project, which participated and promoted social transformations in its time and historical place.

To Gomes (2008), the Socio-Communitarian Education is, therefore, in a first view, the study of a tactic by which the community seeks to intentionally change something in society through educational processes. In this first vision, when seeking this tactic the community embodies its autonomy. Seeking to change society means breaking the heteronomy, with community being as perennially determined by society. However, there is a need to be a little less optimistic and acknowledge a different view, which is the one that leads us to include within the Socio-Communitarian Education cases



where the community is articulated for changes in society. In this case, one must admit that an external entity or institution provoke, strengthen and provide a project to the community, so that it does the final work of effecting the changes.

The historical experience of the first Salesian educational communities of the nineteenth century is a good example of the tension between emancipation and instrumentalisation. If at first, in the late 1854 and 1864, there is an original emancipatory movement around a social and educational intervention, the process of institutionalization of that experience, both in the civil sphere of the nascent State of Italy, as in the ecclesiastical rule approval sphere of the Salesians by the Catholic Church, led to the limitation, if not elimination, of emancipatory aspects, excluding equality between civilians and religious and making an institution of religious only, with the total instrumentalisation of educational experience to the interests of the State and the Church, culminating this instrumentalisation in the proper context of the canonization of the founder of the Salesians, in the twentieth century already. It is for this reason that, after the Second Vatican Council, the Salesians have the same challenges and setbacks of historical update that much older congregations and orders, although they were, at that moment, on the threshold of its first centenary.

We must, therefore, understand that when proposing the study of Socio-Communitarian Education, the proposal is not made as a solving hypothesis of all social and educational problems, but as a questioning of the possibilities of emancipation of communities and people in the constitution of political articulations, expressed in educational activities, that provoke intended social transformations.

Put simply and opening the discussion on research confinements with other areas of education, Socio-Communitarian Education proposes itself as the study of a segment within the research in education and not as the final or saving resolution of the major issues of education. Socio-Communitarian Education is a division in the Science of Education which, like the others, involves its interests and risks. Apart from investigation from historical clairvoyance of its practice occurrence, it needs to be investigated both from a historical perspective as in the critical perspective of its practice, especially, as we have emphasized, in its community categories and educational intervention.

If on one hand it may seem to have its own object, the instrumentalised or emancipatory articulations of the community for social transformation that are expressed by educational processes require in depth dialogues with the Social Sciences, with History and with other areas of Education Science's neighboring human sciences to build languages and methods which allow the proposal of models of understanding of the object that is, actually, surrounded by social and historical subjects.

The urgency of their study – caused by tensions between daily life and history, between tradition and transformation – cannot superimpose the criticism of values that are given in its terms, as a community, social transformation, emancipation, autonomy. Neither the urgency, nor the axiological character of its terms may precede the social and historical investigation, which gives it both the research method as well as the action method. With these early socio-epistemological cares, the research on the Socio-Communitarian Education may be proposed to go beyond rhetoric satisfaction with its scientific discourse and place itself, historically, as an educational praxis.

4. Future Perspectives

Bosco's praxis and educational model compare to the current pedagogical and educational models. It behooves us answering, based on ideas proposed by the educator, the questions that bother us when we discuss the education of our days. So could John Bosco's initiatives in the distant Italy of the nineteenth century, affect what we do with education in the contemporary world in any way?

It is through the understanding of his history and his practices that we set out to answer these questions; John Bosco debriefs us, then: - what have we done, as of our modern education for underprivileged young people in society? What are the new frontiers of the teacher's office, and the educational system? Have we heard the cry of the ones served by our pedagogical models? How to handle the political disregard for education? How to consider education as emancipatory praxis and generator of reflection on the world view of students?

In the vision proposed by Bosco, education is not only providing the most urgent material needs of individuals in training; it is to provide an affective relationship of respect to the student and preventive attitudes generator in relation to the possible reactions presented by the learner in the educational process. It is necessary to ensure the presence, the contact of the educator with the student, the relevance of mutual respect on a daily basis of educational activities. And it is necessary to work on praxis, from the point of view hereby presented, namely, the growth of the students as human beings, able to face life opportunities presented to them, and in order to generate autonomy in their experience, understanding the world in which they operate and understanding the threats posed by the holders of political and social power. In days like these, when media culture imposes a cognitive and informational overload, let us take that fact as an opportunity, rather than a threat and restriction. Modern pedagogy is still unable to benefit from the ubiquity of new information and communication technologies, but Bosco, in the nineteenth century, realized the role of technological development with the formation of his youth, when he implemented vocational education in his works.

As a conclusion, we consider: first, that John Bosco's ideas, practices and praxis, and the resulting socio-communitarian education can be considered as a pedagogical proposal of broad application these days, even when considering the necessary temporal transposition that such action supposes; and second, his pedagogical model, although not considered



as pure pedagogy, not even by the author, has great advantages when compared to modern standards. We believe that the pedagogy and praxis of John Bosco are still present in this endless search for the justification of the ends of education.

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